

# VA Care Is Rated Superior to That in Private Hospitals

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The Department of Veterans Affairs medical system once epitomized poor-quality care. But after a series of changes, the system has been hailed in recent years as a model for health care reform.

Now, survey results released this week indicate that those improvements have translated into a high level of satisfaction among veterans getting treated by the rehabilitated VA.

The telephone survey, conducted in October, found inpatient care received a rating of 83 on a 100-point scale; outpatient care got a rating of 80. In comparison, a similar survey of patients receiving private care found they rated their satisfaction at 73 for inpatient care and 75 for outpatient care. The survey involved more than 200 veterans who received care at one of the VA's 154 hospitals or 875 clinics.

"We're very pleased and continue to be very proud of the work that people are doing in this vast health care system," said Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson. "The real proof in the pudding is in the taste -- that is, 'What do the people we're taking care of think?' And they give us very good grades."

The findings mark the sixth consecutive year the VA health care system has outranked the private sector for customer satisfaction.

Nicholson attributed the high ratings to the changes in the system, such as implementation of electronic records to reduce the risk of errors.

"Our system has become not only much more efficient, but safer," Nicholson said.

The survey, known as the American Customer Satisfaction Index, has been conducted since 1994 by the National Quality Research Center at the University of Michigan business school and two consultants, the CFI Group and the Federal Consulting Group.

Peter S. Gaytan, director of veterans affairs and rehabilitation for the American Legion, said he was not surprised by the findings because the quality of VA care has been steadily improving.

"The old image of the VA warehousing veterans has changed immensely in the past 20 years," Gaytan said.

But Gaytan said many veterans have to wait months or travel long distances to get care because tight budgets have forced many facilities to cut back on service.

"The problem that the American Legion has is the accessibility to care. There are veterans waiting in line to receive care," Gaytan said. "With the veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, it's our hope that they won't be turned away."

Nicholson acknowledged that some veterans do have to wait for care, but he said the waiting time has been improving and continues to improve.

"We absolutely are working on that and are making progress," he said.